

# LOCAL STATISTICS OF LATTICE POINTS ON THE SPHERE

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## 1. STATEMENT OF RESULTS

The set of integer solutions  $(x_1, x_2, x_3)$  to the equation

$$(1.1) \quad x_1^2 + x_2^2 + x_3^2 = n$$

has been much studied. However it appears that the spatial distribution of these solutions at small and critical scales as  $n \rightarrow \infty$  have not been addressed. The main results announced below give strong evidence to the thesis that the solutions behave randomly. This is in sharp contrast to what happens with sums of two or four or more squares.

First we clarify what we mean by random. For a homogeneous space like the  $k$ -dimensional sphere  $S^k$  with its rotation-invariant probability measure  $\hat{\sigma}$ , the binomial process is what you get by placing  $N$  points  $P_1, \dots, P_N$  on  $S^k$  independently according to  $\hat{\sigma}$ . We are interested in statistics, that is functions  $f(P_1, \dots, P_N)$ , which have a given behaviour almost surely, as  $N \rightarrow \infty$ . If this happens we say that this behaviour of  $f$  is that of random points. We shall also contrast features of random points sets with those of “rigid” configurations, by which we mean points on a planar lattice, such as the honeycomb lattice.

A celebrated result of Legendre/Gauss asserts that  $n$  is a sum of three squares if and only if  $n \neq 4^a(8b+7)$ . Let  $\mathcal{E}(n)$  be the set of solutions

$$(1.2) \quad \mathcal{E}(n) = \{\mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{Z}^3 : |\mathbf{x}|^2 = n\}$$

and set

$$(1.3) \quad N = N_n := \#\mathcal{E}(n)$$

The behaviour of  $N_n$  is very subtle and it was a fine achievement in the 1930's when it was shown that  $N_n$  goes to infinity with  $n$  (assuming say that  $n$  is square-free; if  $n = 4^a$  then there are only six solutions). It is known that  $N_n \ll n^{1/2+o(1)}$  and if there are *primitive* lattice points, that is  $\mathbf{x} = (x_1, x_2, x_3)$  with  $\gcd(x_1, x_2, x_3) = 1$  (which happens if and only if

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*Date:* March 2, 2013.

J.B. was supported in part by N.S.F. grants DMS 0808042 and DMS 0835373. Z.R. was supported by the Oswald Veblen Fund during his stay at the Institute for Advanced Study and by the Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 1083/10). P.S. is partially supported by NSF grant DMS-0758299. Z.R. and P.S. were supported by grant No 2006254 from the United States-Israel Binational Science Foundation (BSF), Jerusalem, Israel.

$n \not\equiv 0, 4, 7 \pmod{8}$ ) then there is a lower bound of  $N_n \gg n^{1/2-o(1)}$ . This lower bound is ineffective and indicates that the behaviour of  $N_n$  is still far from being understood [17].

The starting point of our investigation is the fundamental result conjectured by Linnik (and proved by him assuming the Generalized Riemann Hypothesis), that for  $n \not\equiv 0, 4, 7 \pmod{8}$ , the points

$$(1.4) \quad \widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n) := \frac{1}{\sqrt{n}} \mathcal{E}(n) \subset S^2$$

obtained by projecting to the unit sphere, become equidistributed on the unit sphere with respect to  $\widehat{\sigma}$  as  $n \rightarrow \infty$ . This was proved unconditionally by Duke [4, 5] and Golubeva and Fomenko [8], following a breakthrough by Iwaniec [11]. Random points are equidistributed by definition and the above result says that on this crudest global scale the projected lattice points  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  behave like random points. Figure 1 gives some visual support for random behaviour of  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$ .

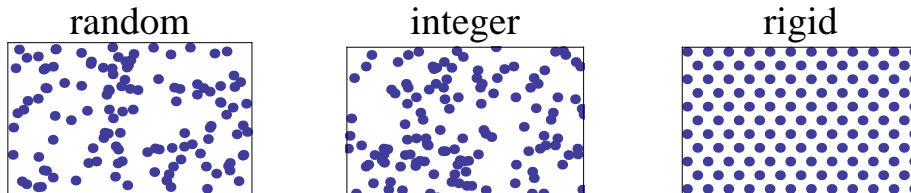


FIGURE 1. Lattice points coming from the prime  $n = 1299709$  (center), versus random points (left) and rigid points (right). The plot displays an area containing about 120 points.

To make this precise we examine various statistics associated with the placement of points in  $S^2$ . Our choice of these statistics is based on robustness tests for the random hypothesis, as well as quantities which are of interest in number theoretical and harmonic analysis applications. Our philosophy in what follows is that the behaviour of a quantity in question is easy to determine for random points while for  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  we settle for estimates for them and also formulate conjectures, which are more precise. That one has to settle for such information for this kind of problem is to be expected given the problematic non-random behaviour of the number  $N_n$  itself.

**1.1. Electrostatic energy.** The electrostatic energy of  $N$  points  $P_1, \dots, P_N$  on  $S^2$  is given by

$$(1.5) \quad E(P_1, \dots, P_N) := \sum_{i \neq j} \frac{1}{|P_i - P_j|}$$

$N$	$E - N(N - 1)$	
	integer	random
1224	-282.	95.
3072	37732.	-4704.
4296	8380.	1747.

TABLE 1. The difference  $E - N(N - 1)$  between the electrostatic energy and its expected value, for various values of  $N$ . In the column labeled “integer”, the energy for  $\hat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  was computed for the primes  $n = 104773$ ,  $104761$  and  $1299763$  with  $N_n$  listed in the left-most column. In the random case the result is a mean value of 20 runs.

This energy  $E$  depends on both the global distribution of the points as well as a moderate penalty for putting the points too close to each other. The minimum energy configuration is known to satisfy [21, 22, 1]

$$(1.6) \quad N^2 - \beta N^{3/2} \leq \min_{P_1, \dots, P_N} E(P_1, \dots, P_N) \leq N^2 - \alpha N^{3/2}$$

for some  $0 < \alpha \leq \beta < \infty$ . The configurations which achieve this are rigid in various senses [3] and we will see below in Corollary 1.5 that our points  $\hat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  are far from being rigid. For random points one has<sup>1</sup> that  $E \sim N^2$  but that  $E - N(N - 1)$  has no definite sign. Our first result is that to leading order the points  $\hat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  have the same energy as the above.

**Theorem 1.1.** *There is some  $\delta > 0$  so that*

$$(1.7) \quad E(\hat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) = N^2 + O(N^{2-\delta})$$

as  $n \rightarrow \infty$ ,  $n \not\equiv 0, 4, 7 \pmod{8}$ .

We have not been able to say anything about the sign of  $E(\hat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) - N(N - 1)$  which according to Table 1.1 appears to vary.

**1.2. Point pair statistics.** The point pair statistic and its variants is at the heart of our investigation. It is a robust statistic as for as testing the randomness hypothesis and it is called Ripley’s function in the statistics literature [18]. For  $P_1, \dots, P_N \in S^2$  and  $0 < r < 2$ , set

$$(1.8) \quad \hat{K}_r(P_1, \dots, P_N) := \sum_{\substack{i \neq j \\ |P_i - P_j| < r}} 1$$

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<sup>1</sup>Here and elsewhere,  $\sim$  is the usual asymptotic symbol denoting convergence to one of the ratio of the two sides.

to be the number of ordered pairs of distinct points at (Euclidean) distance at most  $r$  apart. For fixed  $\epsilon > 0$ , uniformly for  $N^{-1+\epsilon} \leq r \leq 2$ , one has that for  $N$  random points (the binomial process)

$$(1.9) \quad \widehat{K}_r(P_1, \dots, P_N) \sim \frac{1}{4}N(N-1)r^2$$

Based on the results below as well as some numerical experimentation, we conjecture that for  $n$  square-free the points  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  behave randomly w.r.t. Ripley's statistic at scales  $N_n^{-1+\epsilon} \leq r \leq 2$ ; that is

$$(1.10) \quad \widehat{K}_r(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) \sim \frac{N^2 r^2}{4}, \quad \text{as } n \rightarrow \infty.$$

One of our main results is the following which shows that (1.10) is true at least in terms of an upper bound which is off only by a multiplicative constant.

**Theorem 1.2.** *Assume the Generalized Riemann Hypothesis (GRH). Then for fixed  $\epsilon > 0$  and  $N^{-1+\epsilon} \leq r \leq 2$ ,*

$$\widehat{K}_r(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) \ll_{\epsilon} N^2 r^2$$

where the implied constant depends only on  $\epsilon$ .

Remark: We do not need the full force of GRH here, but rather that there are no ‘‘Siegel zeros’’.

We have not succeeded in giving individual lower bounds for  $\widehat{K}_r(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n))$ , what we can show is that at the smallest scale (1.10) holds for most  $n$ 's.

**Theorem 1.3.** *There is some  $\delta_0 > 0$  such that for fixed  $0 < \delta < \delta_0$  and  $r = n^{\delta - \frac{1}{2}}$ ,*

$$\widehat{K}_r(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) \sim \frac{N^2 r^2}{4}$$

for almost all  $n$ .

**1.3. Nearest neighbour statistics.** Closely connected to  $\widehat{K}$  is the distribution of nearest neighbour distances  $d_j$ , i. e. the distance from  $P_j$  to the remaining points. Area considerations show that  $\sum_j d_j^2 \leq 16$ . It is more convenient to work with these squares of the distances. In order to space these numbers at a scale for which they have a limiting distribution in the random case, we rescale them by their mean for the random case, i.e. replace  $d_j^2$  by  $\frac{N}{4}d_j^2$ . Thus for  $P_1, \dots, P_N \in S^2$  define the nearest neighbour spacing measure  $\mu(P_1, \dots, P_N)$  on  $[0, \infty)$  by

$$(1.11) \quad \mu(P_1, \dots, P_N) := \frac{1}{N} \sum_{j=1}^N \delta_{\frac{N}{4}d_j^2}$$

where  $\delta_{\xi}$  is a delta mass at  $\xi \in \mathbb{R}$ . Note that the mean of  $\mu$  is at most 1 and that for random points we have

$$(1.12) \quad \mu(P_1, \dots, P_N) \rightarrow e^{-x} dx, \quad \text{as } N \rightarrow \infty$$

Based on this and numerical experiments (see figure 2) we conjecture:

**Conjecture 1.4.** *As  $n \rightarrow \infty$  along square-free integers,  $n \not\equiv 7 \pmod{8}$ ,*

$$(1.13) \quad \mu(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) \rightarrow e^{-x} dx .$$

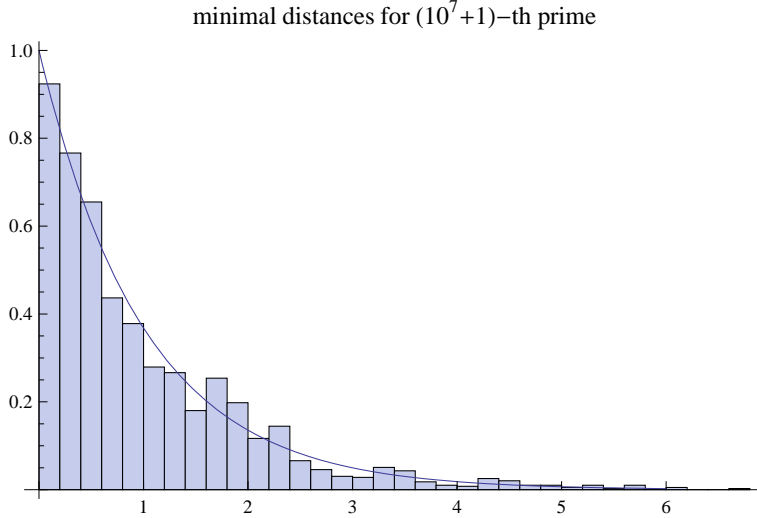


FIGURE 2. A histogram of the scaled minimal spacing between lattice points for  $n = 179424691$ , the 10,000,001-th prime, where  $N_n = 94536$ , and modulo symmetries there are 1970 points. The smooth curve is the exponential distribution  $e^{-s}$ .

As a Corollary to Theorem 1.2 we have

**Corollary 1.5.** *Assume GRH. If  $\nu$  is a weak limit of the  $\mu(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n))$  then  $\nu$  is absolutely continuous, in fact there is an absolute constant  $c_4 > 0$  such that*

$$(1.14) \quad \nu \leq c_4 dx$$

Corollary 1.5 implies that the  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$ 's are not rigid for large  $n$  since for rigid configurations,  $\mu_{P_1, \dots, P_N} \rightarrow \delta_{\pi/\sqrt{12}}$ . Also in as much as it ensures that such a  $\nu$  cannot charge  $\{0\}$  positively, it follows that almost all the points of  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  are essentially separated with balls of radius approximately  $N^{-1/2}$  from the rest. Precisely given a sequence  $\eta_N$  satisfying  $\eta_N = o(N^{-1/2})$ , all but  $o(N)$  of the  $N$  points in  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  have the ball of radius  $\eta_N$  about them free of any other points.

**1.4. Minimum spacing and covering radius.** Given  $P_1, \dots, P_N \in S^2$  define the minimum spacing to be the

$$(1.15) \quad m(P_1, \dots, P_N) := \min_{i \neq j} d_{i,j} = \min_j d_j$$

This statistic is very sensitive to the placement of points and it is of arithmetic interest for  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$ . From the area packing bound we have that

$$(1.16) \quad m(P_1, \dots, P_N) \leq 4/\sqrt{N}$$

for any configuration. In fact the rigid configuration of Figure 1 maximizes  $m$  asymptotically

$$(1.17) \quad \max_{P_1, \dots, P_N} m(P_1, \dots, P_N) \sim \frac{2}{\sqrt{N}} \cdot 2\sqrt{\frac{\pi}{\sqrt{12}}}.$$

For random points the behaviour of the minimal spacing  $m$  is very different

$$(1.18) \quad m(P_1, \dots, P_N) = N^{-1+o(1)}.$$

Based on the random point model as well as number theoretic considerations which involve a nonlinear and shifted variation of Vinogradov's least quadratic residue conjecture [20], we pose

**Conjecture 1.6.**  $m(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) = N^{-1+o(1)}$  as  $n \rightarrow \infty$ .

The lower bound in Conjecture 1.6 is an immediate consequence of the integrality of the points in  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  since that implies that for the projected points  $P_i \neq P_j \in \widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$ , we have  $|P_i - P_j| \geq 1/\sqrt{n}$  and since  $N \geq n^{1/2+o(1)}$  the lower bound follows. It is the upper bound that appears difficult even assuming GRH.

As with the previous statistics we can establish the conjecture for almost all  $n$ . Indeed it follows from Theorem 1.3 that

**Corollary 1.7.** *Given  $\epsilon > 0$ ,  $M(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) \ll_\epsilon N^{-1+\epsilon}$  for almost all  $n$ .*

Note that Conjecture 1.6 would follow from the stronger conjecture of Linnik [13], that for  $\epsilon > 0$  and  $n$  odd and square-free (and  $n \not\equiv 7 \pmod{8}$ ) there are  $x_1, x_2, x_3$  with  $|x_3| \leq n^\epsilon$  and  $x_1^2 + x_2^2 + x_3^2 = n$ .

Finally we examine the covering radius for  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  though there is little of substance that we can prove. Given  $P_1, \dots, P_N \in S^2$ , the covering radius  $M(P_1, \dots, P_N)$  is the least  $r > 0$  so that every point of  $S^2$  is within distance at most  $r$  of some  $P_j$ . Again an area covering argument shows that for any configuration  $M(P_1, \dots, P_N) \geq \frac{4}{\sqrt{N}}$ .

As a statistic, the covering radius  $M$  is much more forgiving than the minimal spacing  $m$  in that the placement of a few bad points does not affect  $M$  drastically. In particular for random points,  $M \leq N^{-1/2+o(1)}$ .

Based on this we conjecture the following, though admittedly it is based on much less evidence than the previous conjectures.

**Conjecture 1.8.**  $M(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) = N^{-1/2+o(1)}$  as  $n \rightarrow \infty$ .

An effectivization of the equidistribution of  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  [8, 5] which is needed in the proof of Theorem 1.1 yields an  $\alpha > 0$  such that  $M(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) \ll N^{-\alpha}$ .

**1.5. Higher dimensions.** The distribution of the solutions to

$$(1.19) \quad x_1^2 + x_2^2 + \cdots + x_t^2 = n$$

for  $t \neq 3$  is very different and certainly non-random. Firstly for  $t = 2$  and say  $n$  a prime,  $n \equiv 1 \pmod{4}$ , there are exactly eight solutions to (1.19). So there is little to say about the distribution for individual such  $n$ 's. However for "generic"  $n$ 's which are sums of two squares, the projections of the solutions to the unit circle are uniformly distributed [12, 7], and for such  $n$ 's the local statistical questions certainly make sense.

For  $t \geq 4$ , the projections onto the unit sphere of the solutions to (1.19) can be examined using the same techniques that we use for  $t = 3$ , with the main differences being that the analysis is easier and the local behaviour is no longer random. We only discuss the last feature and since it is only enhanced with increasing  $t$ , we stick to  $t = 4$ . Let  $\mathcal{E}_4(n)$  be the set of solutions to (1.19) and let  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$  be the projection of this set to  $S^3$ , the unit sphere in  $\mathbb{R}^4$ . The first difference to  $t = 3$  is that  $N_n^{(4)} := \#\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$  is a regularly behaved function of  $n$ . When divided by 8 it is multiplicative and for  $n = p$  an odd prime  $\#\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(p) = 8(p+1)$ . Thus the number of points  $N = N_n^{(4)}$  being placed on  $S^3$  satisfies

$$(1.20) \quad N = n^{1+o(1)}$$

at least for odd  $n$ . For  $N$  random points on  $S^3$  the two point function  $\widehat{K}_r$  defined as in (1.8) satisfies that for  $\epsilon > 0$  and  $N^{-2/3+\epsilon} \leq r \leq 2$

$$(1.21) \quad \widehat{K}_r(P_1, \dots, P_N) \sim N(N-1)V(r)$$

where  $V(r)$  is the relative volume of a cap  $\{x \in S^3 : |x - x_0| < r\}$ ; for small  $r$ ,  $V(r) \sim \frac{2}{3\pi}r^3$ .

On the other hand for  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$ , the integrality of the corresponding points in  $\mathcal{E}_4(n)$ , implies that for  $x \neq y$ ,  $|x - y| \geq 1/\sqrt{n}$  and hence for  $x \neq y \in \widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$

$$(1.22) \quad |x - y| \geq N^{-1/2+o(1)}$$

In particular

$$(1.23) \quad \widehat{K}_r(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)) = 0, \quad r \leq N^{-1/2-\epsilon}$$

Thus at the scales  $N^{-2/3+\epsilon} \leq r \leq N^{-1/2-\epsilon}$ , the point pair function for  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$  and that for random points are very different.

This difference is also reflected in the minimum spacing function  $m(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n))$  for  $N$  points on  $S^3$ . From (1.22) we have the lower bound  $m(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)) \geq N^{-1/2+o(1)}$  and on the other hand there is a similar upper bound, namely

**Proposition 1.9.**

$$(1.24) \quad m(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)) = N^{-1/2+o(1)}.$$

This is in sharp contrast to random points on  $S^3$  for which

$$(1.25) \quad m(P_1, \dots, P_N) = N^{-2/3+o(1)}$$

Thus the points  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$  are much more rigid than random points but they are far from being fully rigid as the latter satisfy (locally these points are placed at the vertices of the face centered cubic lattice [2]):

$$(1.26) \quad \max_{P_1, \dots, P_N} m_4(P_1, \dots, P_N) \sim \frac{2}{N^{1/3}} c, \quad c = \frac{\pi^{2/3}}{\sqrt{2}}$$

The nonrandom behaviour of the points  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$  manifests itself at a much larger scale as well, as is demonstrated by the minimum covering radius  $M_4(P_1, \dots, P_N)$ . While being very nonrigid, random points cover  $S^3$  quite well. For them we have

$$(1.27) \quad M_4(P_1, \dots, P_N) = N^{-1/3+o(1)}.$$

Somewhat surprisingly the points  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$  which are more rigid than random points, are poorly distributed in terms of covering. This phenomenon of what might be called “big holes” was first observed in the context of approximations of  $2 \times 2$  real matrices by certain rational ones, by Harman [9]. For  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)$  we have

**Proposition 1.10.**

$$(1.28) \quad M(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}_4(n)) \geq N^{-1/4+o(1)}.$$

## 2. OUTLINE OF THE PROOFS

For  $n$  squarefree the general mass formula of Minkowski and Siegel, which in the following special case is due to Gauss, expresses  $N_n$  in terms of  $L(1, \chi_{d_n})$  where  $\chi_{d_n}$  is the quadratic character associated to the field  $\mathbb{Q}(\sqrt{-n})$  of discriminant  $d_n$ . From this and Siegel’s lower bound on  $L(1, \chi_d)$  it follows that  $N_n \gg n^{1/2-\epsilon}$  for any  $\epsilon > 0$  (ineffectively). The key tool in our analysis of the local point-pair functions is the mass formula applied to the representations of the binary form  $nu^2 + 2tuv + nv^2$  by the ternary form  $x_1^2 + x_2^2 + x_3^2 = \langle x, x \rangle$ . Since this ternary form has one class in its genus the above, which counts the number  $A(n, t)$  of pairs  $(x, y) \in \mathcal{E}(n) \times \mathcal{E}(n)$  with  $\langle x, y \rangle = t$ , is given by a product of local densities. Again this is a special case of the mass formula, for which an elementary proof as well as an explicit form was given in [19], and this was a critical ingredient in Linnik’s approach to the equidistribution of  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$  (see [6] for a recent exposition and extension of his method). The local to global formula allows us to give rather sharp upper bounds for  $A(n, t)$ . These are then used to control the contributions of nearby points in the sum (1.5) in the course of proving Theorem 1.1. For pairs of points that are not too close we use modular forms and in particular Duke’s theorem. Specifically we effectivise that analysis by giving a power saving (namely  $N^{-\alpha}$ , for some  $\alpha > 0$ ) upper bound for



the spherical cap discrepancy of the points  $\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)$ . Putting these two together leads to Theorem 1.1.

The proof of Theorem 1.2 also uses the local formula for  $A(n, t)$ , this time giving upper bounds for this quantity when summed over  $t$  in short intervals. It is critical that these upper bounds are sharp up to a universal factor and depend only on the subtle function  $N_n$  and not on  $n$ . We achieve this by adapting the upper bound sieve method of Nair [15] to our setting. This leads to an upper bound in terms of a product of local densities of primes connected with  $\chi_{d_n}$ . It is here that we need to assume that there are no Siegel zeros in order to ensure that there is no dependence on  $n$ .

The almost all result in Theorem 1.3 is proven by computing the asymptotic mean and variance of  $\widehat{K}_r(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n)) - N_n^2 r^2/4$ , with  $n \leq R$ . This is approached by analyzing similar asymptotics for

$$(2.1) \quad K_h(\mathcal{E}(n)) = \sum_{\substack{x, y \in \mathcal{E}(n) \\ x - y = h}} 1$$

and

$$(2.2) \quad K_{h,k}(\mathcal{E}(n)) = \sum_{\substack{x, y, z, w \in \mathcal{E}(n) \\ x - y = h, \quad z - w = k}} 1,$$

( $0 \neq h, k \in \mathbb{Z}^3$ ).

The behaviour as  $R \rightarrow \infty$  of  $\sum_{n \leq R} K_h(\mathcal{E}(n))$  may be determined elementarily, while that of  $\sum_{h \leq R} K_{h,k}(\widehat{\mathcal{E}}(n))$  can be derived using Kloosterman's circle method for quadratic forms in 4 variables (see for example [14], [10]). The leading terms are given as products of Hardy-Littlewood local densities. The behaviour of  $\sum_{n \leq R} \widehat{K}_r(\mathcal{E}(n)) N_n$  and  $\sum_{n \leq R} N_n^2$  may be determined using the Besicovich  $r$ -almost periodic properties of  $N_n/\sqrt{n}$  [16]. We rederive this almost periodicity directly using the circle method and this allows us to compare the various local densities directly.

The proof of Proposition 1.9 is immediate from Legendre and Gauss' Theorem. Namely  $n - a^2 = x_1^2 + x_2^2 + x_3^2$  has a solution for  $a = 1$  or  $a = 2$  (recall  $n$  is odd). Proposition 1.10 follows by considering annuli about the north pole  $(1, 0, 0, 0)$ .

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